



## SPEECH OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN HUMANIST FEDERATION

at the 8th International Association of Free Thought

Paris, le 22 September 2017

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

First let me warmly thank the Association Internationale de la Libre Pensée for inviting and welcoming me.

Please allow me as well, as an Italian national, to express my awe at seeing a member of the French government taking the floor at such a Congress.

Today like in the past, and maybe even more today, secular movements have to unite their voices across Europe. When I browse through the programme of this Congress, I am happy to see that collaboration between secularist actors and between different European countries meets such a level of success.

Since the end of the Second World War, the European project and human rights have never been as challenged in the whole of Europe as they are today. The obstacles and challenges are manifold: Brexit negotiations, rising extreme-right populism, governments openly breaching fundamental values, the lack of recognition for freedom of research, the distrust of citizens to a project that they do not understand anymore, uncertainty concerning European integration, the increasing activism of various conservative and even openly reactionary churches and religious groups...

Facing these threats, humanists and secularists have a fundamental role to play. Starting today, we have to work towards reinforcing our humanist values and principles: the impartiality of public authorities, freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief including the freedom not to believe, equality in rights, equality between women and men, equality in freedom and dignity for LGBT people, solidarity with the less fortunate without forgetting about migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers whose rights are violated every day, including in Europe by most European governments. In the face of rising religious and political extremism, I call on all humanists and secularists to reclaim moral values that we have let slide into the hands of all kinds of conservatives.

In saying so, I mean reclaiming certain key concepts that we, the progressive, sometimes hesitate to use because they are too often hijacked, manipulated and instrumentalized by anti-choice groups. These include human dignity, protection of life, protection of families, the promotion of religious freedom, just to name a few. We cannot allow that the defense of these concepts is left to the monopoly of our opponents. For instance, we, humanists and secularists, also obviously protect families but we do so with an inclusive conception open to the multiple forms of families as they exist and we know them in our societies nowadays.

This is one of the objectives that the European Humanist Federation has set itself: reclaim these values and principles. Our federation gathers today more than 60 secularist, laïque, humanist, atheist, rationalist, etc. organisations which all share these values. With our partners including feminist, family planning, LGBT and even progressive religious organisations, we strive to bring a humanist and progressive message in front of European policy-makers at the European Parliament, the Council of Europe or the United Nations.

For instance, last June, we met Frans Timmermans, European Commission First Vice-President in charge of fundamental rights. Early September, we met the Estonian Presidency of the EU Council in Tallinn. Last week, we were in Warsaw for the OSCE's annual meeting where we called for worldwide protection of non-believers. Earlier this week, we were in Geneva to defend abortion. And whatever one's opinion on Europe integration is, this advocacy is fundamental in our opinion so that we can bring our humanist voice and avoid leaving free reins to churches and conservative and reactionary religious organizations.

Before I conclude, I would like to call your attention to a topic dear to my heart: the role of secularism as an integration factor. In many receiving countries, the integration of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers is mostly based on inter-faith dialogue. And, as you know, some migrants leave their countries precisely because they cannot bear extremist religious pressure anymore. This is the case of non-believer, atheist, agnostic and free thinker migrants but also LGBT ones. When they finally arrive to our countries, sometimes in areas with high migrant densities, they do not feel free to express their secularism. We, humanists, should not be shy: we should dare to affirm that secularism is the best vector for integration in diversity. It is about living together but also about human dignity and individual freedom. Think about certain countries, such as mine, Italy, where social support for migrants is too often channeled via religious organisations.

I leave you with this food for thought and thank you in advance for the discussions we will hold, which, I am convinced, will be constructive for European and international secularism.

Giulio Ercolessi